

The Dragon's Tail

A Case Where Interference Was Not Wise

By CLARISSA MACKIE

"Once more I warn you, Deering. It's no joke to meddle in these Asiatic squabbles." Fleetman looked anxiously at his young friend. "Take my advice. You know that I've lived here twenty years, and I'm speaking from experience."

"I promised Lung I'd help him out," declared the other obstinately.

"Of course it's none of my business, but as long as you've told me something about it I can hazard a guess that you've got to put up some money."

"I can afford it. It's sport to me to dip into these things."

"That may be true. No doubt it looks like a sporting proposition to you, Paul, but remember this much, my lad, if you are successful you will be the only one to reap reward whether in enjoyment of the sport and adventure or financially. On the other hand, if you fail and fall into their hands, you will most certainly expect that your country will protect her citizens—you embroil the United States in your personal matters."

"No, I'll not," retorted Paul quickly. "I'll do this trick as a man without a country. If I fail, all right."

"Pigheaded obstinacy!" growled Fleetman. "I feel like a criminal in helping you thus far on your way, Paul. Take my advice and do not step on the dragon's tail."

Paul Deering laughed uneasily. "The dragon's tail is a good distance from his jaws, old man. There'll be time enough to run away before I'm snapped up."

"The dragon's tail is as powerful as his head, and it will toss you into the dragon's jaws. This is the last word, Paul. Will you give it up?"

"I'm sorry to say that I've gone too far—I can't be a piker!"

"Better be a live piker than a dead fool!" growled Fleetman rudely.

A red flush stained Deering's skin, but he said nothing. He had confided in Fleetman, and he was not sorry for it, although he might regret having entered into the negotiation at all. Paul was practically a newcomer in China. He was the son of a very rich man and he had plenty of money to spend. If he chose to spend it in helping a dissolute mandarin flee the country to escape punishment for a great crime it was nobody's business.

Paul had told Fleetman that he was to receive valuable concessions in return for the favor. The mandarin, Lung, possessed much land in his own province that was rich in copper ore, and it was this land that he was conceding to the rich young American in return for his help. Lung had been a revolutionist, but had betrayed his cause to the imperialist party. There was a price upon his sleek head, for the rebels wanted to punish him for his treachery.

From Paul's point of view, and he had only heard smatterings of the truth mixed with much falsehood from Lung's own lips, the mandarin had been badly used by both parties. Lung wanted to leave the country, but he could only do so in a disguise of some sort, and he could not rely upon any of his own people to help him out, for he had been a hard master when in power.

The upshot of the matter was that the impulsive young American had promised that Lung should accompany him back to the United States under guise of his personal servant. Paul had taken passage on a steamer which would sail two days later, and he had confided in Fleetman under promise of strictest secrecy. Some one had to know in case anything did happen to Paul, and Fleetman seemed to think that the chances were good for something to happen to somebody in the matter.

"It's such a futile undertaking," he ended his protestations. "If it was going to benefit anybody to have that rascal got out of his own country I'd help you out on it or at least applaud your courage. But, by Jove, if any man ever deserved a good hanging it is that same Lung."

"I'm sorry, but I've promised," said Paul firmly, and so the subject was dropped for the time.

They sped up the Yangtze for a few miles and then turned down its swiftly flowing yellow stream and made for the mouth. There they could cross to the Huangpu and run up that little tidal river to Shanghai.

Little was said between the two men as the launch scudded back to Shanghai, but when they reached the jetty and Fleetman turned the craft over to the care of his Chinese boatman he referred once more to the matter.

"When are you going aboard the Java?"

"At dusk tomorrow," was Paul's reply.

"When does your man join you?"

"As soon after sunset as possible. I've already furnished him with the necessary clothing for disguising himself. He's been hiding in a half ruined temple up there and is starved almost to a skeleton. That in itself is a disguise, for he was a pretty sleek looking old customer before they got after him so I've been told."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Paul. I've

some cumshas (gifts) for your father and mother. If you do get into any difficulty remember you can call upon me to the limit to help you out."

"Thank you, Fleetman. That remark makes me sorry I entered into the confounded business. I don't want to involve you in anything," Paul spoke with real regret.

"Never mind. As long as you've entered into it go slow, and if you do come a cropper I'll do what I can."

The next day was a busy one for Paul Deering. He had already purchased tickets for himself and servant, Van Sing, and completed the necessary formalities to get a native out of the country. If he could manage the rest of it with as much dispatch there was no doubt that the mandarin, Lung, would disappear from his native heath forever without leaving a clue to the manner of his departure.

But Paul Deering reckoned without his host. In other words, he had stepped on the dragon's tail, and the jaws of the monster were not far away—even as Fleetman had prophesied.

The day drew to a stormy close. It rained heavily, and darkness set in early. All this boded good the furtherance of Paul's scheme, although Lung might have a hard time of it rocking down the Yangtze in his frail sampan.

Paul waited at Punderson's jetty for Lung's arrival. The slanting rain beat heavily on his rubber clothing, and a raw wind came out of the east and tried to discourage his waiting.

At last a small shadow took shape out of the dull grayness of the river, grew larger as it neared the jetty, something bumped softly against the steps. In a few minutes a tall, slight form loomed out of the gloom of the flight of steps, and the mandarin, Lung, stood before his deliverer. From a lamp post near by a stream of light fell on Lung's figure and displayed a disguise that was admirable, for the mandarin had so changed his appearance with various chalks and chemicals that few would have recognized in the melancholy, cadaverous cheeked Chinaman, garbed in a straw rain suit, the once fat and prosperous mandarin, Lung.

Paul hurried him to the tug which was puffing to and fro between the Java and the wharf in Shanghai, and they were soon speeding down the river to where the Java lay in the mouth of the stream.

Their arrival at night was timely. Paul took to his bed as a seasick passenger, and his valet was in close attendance upon him for days.

As they neared the coast of America Paul recovered rapidly, and as he was actually sickening for fresh air and exercise he spent the remainder of the voyage on deck, while Lung kept out of the way as much as his duties would permit. Paul was glad they were nearly there. His responsibility for Lung's safety would be ended when they docked in San Francisco. He would be glad to have saved the life of one poor devil, but he decided not to try it again. There was something about Lung that aroused his antipathy. The more he saw of him the less he liked him.

He hoped that Lung's escape would not be discovered until after the Java docked. It would give the fellow a chance. He hardly thought it likely they would discover the escape of the mandarin from China, although they might suspect it later. Lung had been in hiding for months, and his appearance had greatly changed. Unless his enemies had held him under surveillance, even in his hiding place, knowing that they could pounce upon him any time they wanted him, he would not be missed from the country for a long while—not until that country had been thoroughly combed.

The Java steamed through the Golden Gate before dawn and warped into her dock in a pale gray light. There were a few people gathered there on the wharf, but to the busy passengers on the great steamer they were a blur of unfamiliar faces and forms. The Java was several hours ahead of the expected time of her arrival.

"You are a stranger here. Can I do anything to help you?" asked Paul of his valet as they parted in the stateroom.

Lung shook his head. He was very nervous, and his black, beady eyes darted suspiciously here and there as if seeking out hidden enemies. "I know where I go—a cousin meets me," he said in the laborious English that he had acquired from a missionary.

He expressed his thanks to his deliverer and said that he would have the copper lands transferred to him. Then he melted away from Paul's side with a flat soft felt hat pulled down over his face and his worldly goods tied in a big bundle in his hand. In the other hand his passport was tightly clutched.

Paul saw him again once, but he never forgot the scene. Just as Paul was leaving the gangplank he saw Lung's spare form ahead of him on the wharf. The mandarin was hesitating, perhaps looking for the cousin who would meet him there in the new country. As Paul looked and as Lung hesitated there was a rush of blue blouse Chinamen from behind a pile of coals on the dock. There came a scream of awful fear from Lung as they closed about him.

An instant later the blue clad Chinamen melted away before the coming of a policeman and several stevedores. They disappeared like rats in some invisible holes, but they left something behind on the dock.

Paul drew near and shuddered. The disguised mandarin, Lung, lay dead from a dozen knife thrusts. His escape from China had been in vain.

They had stepped on the dragon's tail in Asia, and its jaws had snapped on its victim in fireway America.

TANGIER ISLAND.

Where the People Do Without Jails, Lawyers, Horses and Cows.

There is a little island in Chesapeake bay, 125 miles south of Baltimore, where the world has stood still for more than a hundred years. Tangier island is five miles long and much less than a mile wide, but more than 1,500 people live on it. There is only one street, nine feet wide, without sidewalks, and the houses are all built along this street with narrow canals of the deep water of the bay between each two houses. There is only one church, presided over by a Methodist minister, and only one doctor, and there is no cemetery, the dead of each family being buried in the yard. There is no newspaper, no jail, no lockup and no lawyers nor any need for them. Everybody is deeply religious, and profanity is punished with a fine imposed by the deacon of the church.

The men go fishing and crabbing in sailboats early on Monday mornings and do not come home until Saturdays, when they have marketed their sea harvests in towns on the mainland. There are no gardens, no horses or cows, but plenty of chickens are raised. Fuel is supplied to the islanders by sloops, which come very month or so loaded with wood and anchor off Tangier, sending small boats piled with cordwood and kindlings to every house by means of the little canals. The women wear sunbonnets and go barefooted, and there is an organ in nearly every home. Tangier was first settled by white people in 1686 and before that time was occupied by the Indians.—Exchange.

A Preference.

Footlights—So you've seen my Hamlet. Well, what do you think of it? Critical Friend—I prefer Shakespeare's. Boston Transcript.

Still in the Future.

Cashier (coughing)—Pardon me, I did not catch your last name. Ethel (blushing)—I haven't caught it yet myself.—Cleveland Leader.

Royal Night Bodyguards.

For more than 400 years a body of men known as the Monteros de Espinosa have enjoyed the exclusive privilege of watching over the slumbers of the kings and queens of Spain. They are bound by tradition to be natives of Espinosa and to have served with distinction in the army. One of these is on guard at the door of the bedroom of each royal personage in the palace, and the others, armed with huge halberds and wearing felt soled shoes, tread silently all through the night along the corridors and halls. Their service begins at midnight and ceases at 7 in the morning.

Japanese "Silent" Music.

A curious ceremony used to be performed in Japan by the court musicians at certain Shinto festivals. Both strings and wind instruments were used, but it was held that no sound should be allowed to fall upon unworthy ears, and, as some of the ears present might be unworthy, all the motions of playing were gone through by the musicians, but not a single sound was heard. This strange custom dated back many generations.

Use For a Friend.

"I let my house furnished, and they have had measles there. Of course we've had the place disinfected, so I suppose it's quite safe. What do you think?"

"I fancy it would be all right, dear. But I think perhaps it would be safer to lend it to a friend first."—London Punch.

Corrected.

"Was Rome founded by Romeo?" inquired a pupil of the teacher. "No, my son," replied the wise man. "It was Juliet who was found dead by Romeo."—London Answers.

Dividing the Task.

Lottie—Oh, well, let's kiss and make up. Dottie—All right, dear. I'll do the kissing, but you've had more experience with the other part of the program.—Cleveland Leader.

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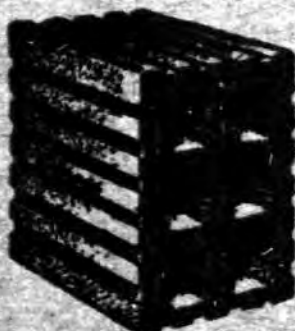
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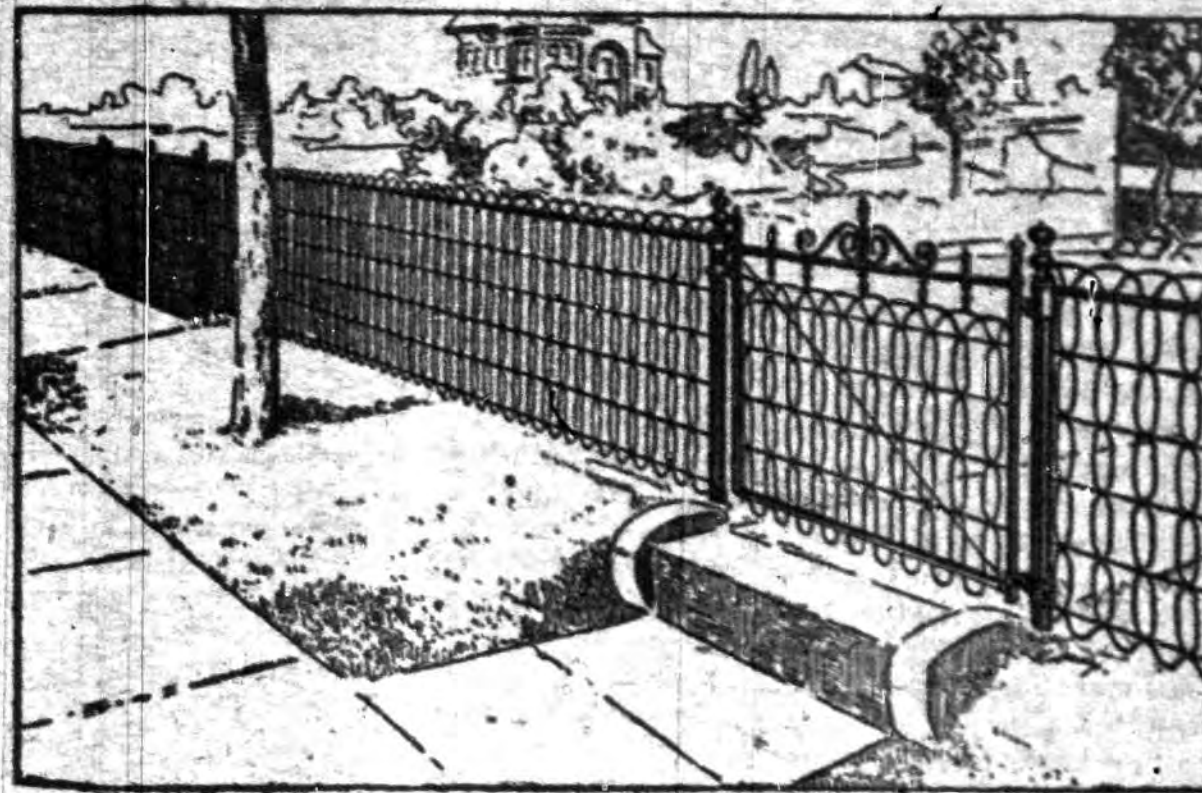
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